

Self-Censorship of the Nira Radia Tapes: A Critical Juncture in the Indian Journalistic Field

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The analysis of the news media's self-censorship of one of the biggest corruption scandals in India foregrounds the role it plays in institutionalizing a narrow alliance of the political and business elite in a crony capitalist polity. Employing a synthesis of field theory and new institutional theory, this article looks at the macrolevel changes in the political power structure and the neoliberal architecture of the media as well as the internal dynamics of the journalistic field to analyze the discursive processes of censorship in this case study. This research illuminates the interrelationships between the journalistic field and the field of power as a consequence of the Indian state's neoliberal restructuring. Drawing on interviews with 26 journalists, the article finds the news media deeply implicated in the neoliberal project. At the same time, creative strategies of resistance by a few journalists attempting to hold on to democratic values in a society where those values are under assault cannot be underestimated.

Keywords: self-censorship, journalism studies, India, social media, crony capitalism, neoliberalization

This article examines the Indian news media's coverage of the recorded conversations of an influential lobbyist, Nira Radia, which were leaked in 2010. These recordings illuminated the entrenched collusion among the journalistic, political, and business elite of the country in subverting democracy. Despite the nature of revelations, the response of the traditional mainstream news media was to black out the story when the tapes became public (Muralidharan, 2010). This attempt at censoring what is often termed the largest corporate media scandal of the country ultimately proved unsuccessful. The silence eventually unraveled due to a complex interaction of factors such as professional ideals, a vibrant civil society, and the democratizing potential of the social media. The exposure of journalists' collusion with the ruling elite resulted in a crisis of credibility for the Indian news media (Bidwai, 2010; Ninan, 2010; Saeed, 2015). These conversations reveal the news media not just as a "stenographer to power" but also as an "active and eager participant in the abuse of power" (Muralidharan, 2010, p. 10), exposing its "anti-democratic" nature (McChesney & Scott, 2004, p. 2).

Employing a synthesis of field theory and new institutional theory, this article looks at the macrolevel changes in the political power structure and the neoliberal architecture of the media as well as

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the internal dynamics of the journalistic field to analyze the discursive processes of self-censorship in this case study. For the purposes of this article, self-censorship refers to the politics of compliance of the media without a manifest external intervention (Lee & Chan, 2008). More specifically, this research attempts to illuminate journalistic practice and the factors that influence it, at the intersection of political and economic interests in a crony capitalist polity. More broadly, it attempts to contribute to an understanding of the interrelationships between the journalistic field and the ruling class, as a consequence of neoliberal reforms in the world's largest democracy. Finally, this article finds the news media deeply implicated in the neoliberal project institutionalizing rather than scrutinizing "the narrow alliance of the ruling elite on which the Indian polity rests" (Kohli, 2007, p. 112).

The Changing Context

The transformation of the Indian media industry has been so rapid that scholarship about its social implications lags far behind. India's pivot from a statist, centrally planned economy to a market-oriented model transformed a protected media sector characterized by state monopoly over television into an economic giant, one of the fastest growing markets in the world (Athique, 2012; Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; N. Mehta, 2008; Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010). Scholarship on this paradigmatic change of the media system, which has arguably made India home to the largest concentration of satellite television news channels (Chakravartty, 2004; N. Mehta, 2008; Rajagopal, 2001), has been divided between celebratory discourse and alarmist polemic. Arguments attribute this revolutionary growth to having increased plurality, enabled democratic participation of the subaltern, and scrutiny of the powerful on the one hand, whereas others lament media's declining independence subject to the added weight of commercial pressures and opaque ownership structures (Rajagopal, 2001; Ranganathan, 2014; S. Rao & Wasserman, 2015; Thomas, 2010; Thussu, 2005; Udupa, 2012). Some scholars contest this binary reading, arguing instead that the implications are contradictory whereby political pressures may have receded, thus facilitating a greater scrutiny of the political class; however, pressures exerted by the capitalist class have intensified (S. Rao, 2009; U. Rao, 2010a).

The interlinked paradoxes in one of the world's largest news media—such as growth in the advocacy role of the media, on the one hand, and the growing power of business over the news media on the other (S. Rao & Mudgal, 2015)—expanding public sphere in contrast to increasing censorship in the news media make the relationship between democracy and journalism far more conflicted in the Indian context. Through the examination of the self-censorship processes in the news coverage of the Nira Radia story and its eventual unraveling, this article attempts to fill a glaring gap in research on the role of journalists and dramatically changing journalistic practices in postliberalized India (S. Rao & Mudgal, 2015). Additionally, this case study illuminates the under researched "nexus between government, corporate world, and media owners" that undergirds the power structure and its implications for democracy (S. Rao, 2016, p. 14).

To analyze the relationship between journalism and the dominant structures of power, this article draws into dialogue two major theories of journalistic practice: Bourdieu's field theory and new institutional theory. These are reviewed briefly before the specificities of the Indian situation are discussed. The mechanisms by which self-censorship of the Nira Radia story was sustained are outlined,

and the reasons for its collapse examined. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings presented here.

Theoretical Lens: A Synthesis of Field Theory and New Institutionalism

The article employs a synthesis of two related theoretical approaches (Benson & Neveu, 2005; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983): Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and the new institutionalist understanding of journalism (Cook, 1998; Kaplan, 2002; Sparrow, 1999). Amalgamated, their combined strengths enable a theoretical architecture adequate to examine journalistic practice in this case study.

Both the theoretical frameworks illuminate the shared unifying set of assumptions and practices that are constitutive of a field or institution conceptualizing these specialized spheres of social practices with a degree of autonomy that negotiates with external pulls and pressures from the field of power (Bourdieu, 1998, 2005). A shared set of values and assumptions constitutes the journalistic *doxa* (field theory) or rules and norms (new institutional theory) that have significant explanatory power when analyzing the clampdown on the Nira Radia news story. Here, new institutionalist theorists such as North (1991) make a distinction between formal (or *doxa*) and informal norms or rules of the game that help explain the gap between journalistic practice that resides on the ground and the democratic values that journalists profess to adhere to in their practice.

Field theory's conceptual tools enable a greater understanding of internal dynamics with concepts such as capital and competition within a field. The struggle for differentiation and dominance among agents within the Indian journalistic field contributed to fissures in the silence on the story. Bourdieu delineates the different kinds of capital—economic (revenue, circulation, etc.) and cultural (skills, educational pedigree, etc.)—agents and fields accumulate to mark their difference in relation to other agents and fields (Bourdieu, 1998). In this case, they aid analysis of how democratic discourse was restored, whereas new institutional theory lays greater stress on the construction of overarching institutional homogeneity in response to an uncertain environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Ryfe, 2006). New institutionalism's conception of homogeneity contributes to a greater understanding of the widespread conformity in treating the subject as taboo.

New institutional theory subordinates individuals to the logic of the organization, thus leaving little agency with the individual agents or journalists, discounting empirical evidence of how journalists' subjective beliefs influence news decisions (Kepplinger, Brosius, & Staab, 1991; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996). In this regard, Bourdieu doesn't deprive journalists' agency, which, as the evidence in this case suggests, was notable in disrupting the consensus within the news media on censoring the Nira Radia story.

Field theory enables mapping interrelationships between the journalistic field and the field of power (i.e., the economic and political fields; Bourdieu, 2005). Both the macro influences—economic and political fields—exert heteronomous pressures on the field of journalism, which is conceptualized as weakly autonomous (Bourdieu, 2005). Examining the complex interplay of these external pressures, the conflation of the two fields is tempting in a crony capitalist polity like India. However, understanding the unraveling of censorship remains partial if the influence of the political sphere is not treated as analytically distinct as

underscored by new institutionalists (Benson, 2006; Cook, 1998; Kaplan, 2006; Ryfe, 2006). In addition, the concept of symbolic capital or the media's power to define and construct reality is useful in understanding the unique position media occupies in the power structure.

Methodological Approach

I used the qualitative research method of in-depth and semi structured face-to-face interviews with 26 journalists (10 from broadcast, 12 from print, and four from online news organizations) directly involved with the coverage of the Nira Radia story to build a description of the discursive processes of self-censorship. A majority of the journalists, interviewed between January 2014 and September 2015, represented organizations central to the field of English-language journalism, such as *The Times of India*, *The Economic Times*, *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express*, *The Hindustan Times*, *DNA*, *Outlook*, and *Open* magazines, and news channels such as CNN-IBN, TV Today, NDTV, CNBC-TV18 based in Delhi. There were a few from Hindi-language news media, such as NDTV India and Aaj Tak. This is far from exhaustive in a country riven by significant tensions among national and subnational media, television, and newspapers leading Rajagopal (2001) to allude to a "split public" (p. 151). Evidence indicates that the staggering growth of Indian language media has challenged the dominance and reach of English-language media (Jeffrey, 1993; Neyazi, 2011).

However, these divisions may be overstated, particularly when examining the news media's relationship with the ruling elite who exert strong coercive political and economic pressures cross-cutting media, irrespective of language and region (Maheshwari & Sparks, 2018). Additionally, the trend of commercialization is salient in both the English and vernacular-language media in their pursuit of profits because liberalization resulted in greater similarity than is often assumed (Chadha & Koliska, 2014; U. Rao, 2010a). The phenomenon of strident Internet Hindu nationalism on the English-dominated new media complicates the split public thesis further (Udupa, 2015). Interviews for this research indicated that national English-language media drove the agenda in this story that largely implicated journalists working in the urban-focused English-language press. Journalists interviewed feared reprisals, and many have been anonymized, as requested.

Anatomy of Self-Censorship

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, elected a second time in 2009, was hit by a swarm of corruption scandals. The biggest among these was the 2G spectrum scam (Bhattacharya, 2017). This related to the allocation of telecommunication licenses at throwaway prices, leading to a loss of nearly \$7 billion to the Indian government, in a scandal *TIME* magazine described second to Watergate in its "top ten abuses of power" (Tharoor, 2011, para. 2).

Unknown to the public, the investigation of this scam included surreptitious wiretapping of a high-profile corporate lobbyist, Nira Radia, by the tax authorities of the government of India in 2008–09, in their effort to trace tax evasion and money laundering (Saeed, 2015). Radia represented considerable business interests, including two of India's largest conglomerates, Reliance and Tata. These recorded conversations, eventually leaked, made it evident that her job was to lobby for A. Raja, a politician well-disposed to the business interests of her clients, to be allocated the telecommunication portfolio (Bisht, 2010). Her clients such

as Tata and Reliance Industries had a significant interest in the telecom sector. Most of these recorded conversations relate to the hectic goings on at the time of cabinet formation in 2009 (Bisht, 2010).

Evidently newsworthy, the "Radia tapes" exposed the extent of democratic subversion by a "select oligarchy" (Bisht, 2010). They reflected the distinct ideological change in the willingness of the state to allow Indian capital to accumulate unchecked, making India's big business richer and bigger (Athique, 2012). The recorded conversations had been leaked to several media houses by an unknown source and were available in the public domain, circulating through the Internet for several weeks, as many editors and journalists have testified in interviews. And yet the mainstream press chose to ignore the story despite the intense public interest evident from social media (Chadha & Koliska, 2016). Instead of triggering follow-up stories, investigations and debate, it was met by a "strategic silence" by the Indian media with the exception of a few (Joseph, 2010, para. 1).

It was not hard to fathom why the media feared reproducing them, given the long list of powerful interlocutors in these transcripts. They illuminate the brazen and entrenched nexus between elite politicians and capitalists in plundering state-owned resources (Chadha, 2012). The Indian polity rests on a narrow coalition of the economic and political elite, and these transcripts were evidence of the proximity and consolidation of the state's embrace of capital since structural adjustment in 1991 (Kohli, 2007). They revealed how not just natural resources and infrastructure but policy making itself had been given over to corporations (Pandita, 2010). One of the most cited excerpts from the extensive conversations is that of the country's richest businessman, Mukesh Ambani, claiming the Congress party, leading the government at the time, was his personal property. This was borne out a few years later when another corruption scandal unraveled, exposing how the Congress-led government enabled Ambani's Reliance Industries' theft of the country's gas reserves (Nayar, Mukherjee, & Tata, 2013).

The conversations also highlighted the active role journalists played in this collusion. The tapes revealed journalists

offering the lobbyist's clients scripted interviews, giving advice on how to place stories in media outlets, talking about writing columns relying on positions articulated by Radia, and even apparently conveying messages on behalf of political interests close to the lobbyist. (Chadha & Koliska, 2016, p. 199)

Radia is heard boasting about how she got stories adverse to her client's interests suppressed and their views reproduced prominently as news stories.

It exposed a compromised fourth estate. Several high-profile journalists and editors were seen to be lobbying or peddling influence in these conversations including some of the best-known television journalists such as NDTV's Barkha Dutt were heard acting as power brokers in this process. These conversations are from the time when the cabinet was being constituted after UPA's election for a second tenure in 2009, and the messy pulls and pressures of coalition politics were being reported at a breathless pace on live television. Radia was trying to influence decision making in the appointment of the telecom minister. The transcripts suggest that Barkha Dutt, a celebrated television journalist, used her access to the government to intercede on Radia's

behalf. She denied this allegation, saying she did no more than “humor a source who was providing me information during a rapidly changing news story” (Lahiri, 2010, para. 4).

However, there was far more damaging evidence against journalists such as the national daily *The Hindustan Times*’ advisory editorial director, Vir Sanghvi. This conversation was taking place in the context of an acrimonious public feud between the two Ambani brothers, the owners of India’s largest conglomerate, who were battling over control of the country’s natural resources, such as oil fields, in the highest court of India. This excerpt from the transcripts shows Vir Sanghvi offering to do a “fully scripted” interview with Radia’s client and India’s richest man, Mukesh Ambani:

What kind of story do you want? Because this will go as Counterpoint, so it will be like most-most read, but it can’t seem too slanted, yet it is an ideal opportunity to get all the points across. It has to be fully scripted. I have to come in and do a run through with him [Mukesh Ambani] before . . . we have to rehearse it before the cameras come in. (“*What kind of story.*” 2010, para. 16)

Sanghvi’s column in *The Hindustan Times*, which was published the day after this conversation, faithfully reproduced Nira Radia’s views, advocating the interests of Mukesh Ambani (Jebaraj, 2010). Considerable criticism heaped on senior and high-profile journalists such as Dutt and Sanghvi, particularly on social media, was about the gap among their rhetoric about being fearless, adversarial journalists holding the powerful accountable on the one hand, and their proximity to them in practice. U. Rao’s (2010b) anthropological work foregrounds journalists’ “performances of distance” (p. 94) to conceal proximity to the powerful. Whether individual journalists can be held guilty or not, there is no doubt that these conversations were incontrovertible evidence of subversion of democracy at the highest level.

Despite the nature of the revelations, the scandal brought to the fore that the mainstream media blacked it out. The story came to light when two news magazines, *Open* and *Outlook*, posted the transcripts and audio recordings on their website on November 18, 2010 (Chadha, 2012). Weekly newsmagazine *Outlook*’s introductory statement, “India, the republic, is now on sale,” was no overstatement, reflecting the enormity of the crisis (Bisht, 2010). Both magazines are owned by corporate houses—*Outlook* by the Raheja Group, a real estate business group, whereas *Open* magazine is owned by one of the country’s largest conglomerates, the RPG-Sanjeev Goenka Group.

Corporate ownership of these two publications notwithstanding, they defied the prevailing orthodoxy of steering clear of this controversial story. Both the weekly newsmagazines had intrepid journalists at their helm. *Outlook* had forged a reputation for critical scrutiny of the powerful due to its celebrated editor Vinod Mehta. Knowing that corporate rivalry was the reason for this leak, in conjunction with the commercial implications of taking on such influential actors for his respected but small publication, made Mehta hesitate when deliberating over the decision of whether to publish (V. Mehta, 2011). Finally, the public interest in the Radia conversations, greater than he had come across in any other news story in his decades-long career, outweighed his apprehensions.

While *Outlook* deliberated, they heard that competition, the newly launched *Open* magazine, might steal a march over them. As a fledgling publication, *Open* was among the last to receive the audio recordings. With a young team of journalists, they decided to publish them knowing the considerable risks involved. They had a strong incentive: to make a mark in a hypercompetitive market:

We decided to go ahead with the story, didn't tell anyone except for one or two reporters, releasing the story at the last minute. Even the publisher didn't know what the story was, leave alone the owner. There was no question in our minds. If any of these people had been contacted this story would never have seen the light of day. Why do you think no one had published them although others had these tapes probably 6–8 months before us. Even when we did a follow up a week after we broke the story, we called up two people for comments. The next hour a call had come from our owner that the story was not to run. (Journalist, personal communication, May 7, 2015)

One of the *Outlook* journalists divulged they too

disregarded journalistic norms such as fact checking and reaching out to get the version of all of those on tapes when you are in a hurry, especially when you have a sense someone else also may have the story. (Journalist, personal communication, February 21, 2015)

It earned *Open* magazine the wrath of powerful people, but it also immediately helped get the outlet recognition, differentiating them in a crowded field. One of the *Open* journalists asserts they came to be known as a "rogue journalistic enterprise" for their "rebelliousness" (Journalist, personal communication, August 5, 2014). Craven conformity was so much the norm that journalistic scrutiny of the powerful was considered rebellion.

The mainstream media continued to ignore the issue for 10 days, even after the two magazines uploaded the audio on their websites and published them in print, generating considerable public interest (Chadha, 2012). Silence on the issue seemed particularly deafening because it included the usually rambunctious, often shrill, television news channels. Although not reporting the story, many media houses justified their caution to the journalistic duty of ascertaining the authenticity of the transcripts (Ranganathan, 2014). Thus, inability to verify the source and authenticity of the evidence was employed as "boundary work" to exclude this story from journalistic content (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, p. 19). However, this justification was perceived as an excuse because most of those caught on the tapes did not dispute their genuineness (Chadha, 2012).

"The brand leaders abdicated their role as watchdogs" among the newspapers (Journalist, personal communication, May 7, 2015). There were some exceptions, such as the newly founded newspaper *DNA*—published from Mumbai, the financial capital, rather than Delhi, the political capital—which chose to report on the issue, albeit cautiously:

What is really scary is that, despite living in a "democracy" that boasts of a "free press," if you were dependent only on TV and big newspapers for the biggest news developments of

the day, you would never have known about the Nira Radia tapes, and the murky role of media persons as political power brokers. (Sampath, 2010, para. 4)

In an interview, the author of this column explained to me how his location in Mumbai instead of Delhi allowed him the liberty to write critically of the media at a time when most others chose to tread carefully around this issue:

It was a column so I had a certain degree of autonomy. I was more or less insulated probably as I was in Mumbai writing for a Bombay paper. I am not sure I would have been able to write this had I been in Delhi writing for a Delhi paper. There is a borderline complicitness with media being an insider in the political capital. (Journalist, personal communication, January 4, 2015)

This view was echoed by a political journalist of another Delhi-based publication:

It (Delhi) is just too incestuous. If you meet them at parties every night and call them by their first name then what are the chances you will take them on? You can't have editors and journalists half the time schmoozing politicians, bureaucrats, serving consultancies, think tanks. (Journalist, personal communication, May 7, 2015)

In fact, many journalists achieve their elite status because of their proximity and access to the powerful.

A senior journalist who works for one of the largest national newspapers recalled they were the first to get possession of the transcripts from the unknown whistleblower. This was months before the story was broken by the two news magazines. He recounts the myriad obstructive interventions that his attempts to get the story published met with:

Our stories were in the works much before it was published in *Open* and *Outlook*. Right at the start, I apprehended resistance so I roped in XYZ (name withheld) hoping to increase the chances of its publication because he is part of the establishment much more than I am. That didn't work either. They were very wary even though the focus of my stories were journalists not the businessmen. This was a rare instance of owners intervening. I was told the managing director is looking at it; usually they don't bother.

Q: Why wary of reporting on the media?

A: First of all, they were not too keen on it as they were being shown in a poor light in some conversations. Then there was uneasiness as it shows how they are all complicit in the fourth estate turning completely into access journalism. This is going to be disrupting all that, raise questions about journalism as it is being practiced. But we couldn't ignore it anymore after it became a big political story. (Journalist, personal communication, May 7, 2015).

It became a big political story when the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India, a constitutionally mandated regulatory state institution, published a report with a harsh indictment of the telecommunication minister and the government's role in the 2G spectrum scam ("2G Scam," 2010). The CAG put the loss caused by this scam to the government to be a staggering \$40 billion, a number so astonishing that the report was given saturation coverage by the mainstream media. This contributed to growing public interest in lobbyist Nira Radia and her machinations in lobbying for A. Raja as telecommunications minister. Eventually, surging public anger on social media compelled mainstream press to break its silence. The national news media had to reflect public resentment against systemic corruption and crony capitalism revealed by multiple scandals.

"Whether it is in tune with popular mood or institutional pressures they don't want to be at odds with either and that's why the foremost job of a journalist according to them is to create an ambience for advertising" (Journalist, personal communication, December 9, 2014). This underscores the virtuous cycle of news media and neoliberalism reinforcing each other and the media's salient role in remaking the nation along consumerist ideologies (Mazzarella, 2003; U. Rao, 2010a; Udupa, 2015).

Besides the powerful interests they would antagonize, Manu Joseph (2010), editor of *Open* magazine, observed that they knew publishing this story would breach "a sacred code of Indian journalism" not to turn the spotlight inward (Joseph, 2010). Another political journalist alludes to this implicit understanding that the media will not scrutinize their own working. "There was the omertà kind of understanding that the media will not touch each other. It was part of acculturation as a journalist" (Journalist, personal communication, December 7, 2014). This further compounded the news media's quiescence on the issue.

On the decline but the national mainstream media still retains power in news making and news framing and has played an agenda-setting role especially on national issues (S. Rao & Mudgal, 2015). Its sustained silence might have been successful in burying the story altogether before the existence of social media. As the silence in the mainstream traditional media became louder, the buzz on social media like Facebook and Twitter about the story's blackout became deafening. Hashtags such as Barkhagate, mediamafia, paidmedia became trending topics (Chadha, 2012).

Twitter allowed netizens to express their outrage at the media's participation in corruption and its coverup. Social media delighted in exposing the distance between journalists' public rhetoric and private reality (McNair, 2000). International publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, *Huffington Post*, and *The Washington Post* were quick to give coverage to the scandal unlike the domestic press. Interestingly, Barkha Dutt and Vir Sanghvi chose Twitter to defend their actions throughout the time this controversy unfolded. Recent studies on Twitter in India have demonstrated its potential to create a sustained conversation between journalists and civil society that keeps the issue alive in the fast-changing news landscape (Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015).

As the upheaval in social media and public interest in the issue refused to abate, legacy media increasingly found it difficult to withstand the onslaught. Finally, the country's highest circulated English language daily newspaper *The Times of India* broke its silence, reporting the issue online and one of the

most watched news channels *CNN IBN* broadcast an extensive discussion playing the transcripts, followed by other news channels.

This was seen as a triumph of the power of emerging technologies over traditional media with netizens posting self-congratulatory messages on social media (Dasgupta, 2010). Unlike the past, where the traditional and nontraditional media had shown synergy in coverage of issues, this issue underscored the tensions and disconnect between the two. In instances like the terrorist attacks in Mumbai in 2008, both media had reinforced each other with Twitter breaking news while traditional media delineated the bigger picture. Mainstream media was seen as an "elite institution" (U. Rao, 2010b, p. 26), the traditional media gatekeepers controlling access to the public sphere while new media represented voices that sought to disrupt this hegemony symbolizing increasing "professional-participatory tension" (Carlson & Lewis, 2015, p. 19). Limits were imposed on censorship by voices on the Internet that undermined traditional media's control over public discourse, underscoring its democratizing potential. With the fourth estate relinquishing its watchdog role, it would be tempting to see this as the formation of the fifth estate that enabled networked citizens to demand accountability (Dutton, 2009).

However, a political journalist who has worked for both the legacy and online news media tempers this optimism:

Mention of the tapes without the actual tapes was already floating around in social media online for a long time, but it needed the credibility of serious journalists working in print who had gone through the tapes for it to be taken seriously. Online readership is 2–3 lakhs [200,000–300,000], which isn't much but the fact that these things were published in print multiplied their credibility to the extent that the social media was able to magnify it. (Journalist, personal communication, May 17, 2015)

Thus, online media needed legitimation by and the resources of the traditional media to be effective. The cumulative pressure compelled the mainstream press to relinquish its subservience. However, subversion of participatory media's democratic potential became salient in its mobilization to enlist support for Hindu nationalist politics and its controversial leader Narendra Modi who is the incumbent prime minister (Udupa, 2015). The populist leader employs peer-to-peer communication technologies to attack liberal, secular journalists critical of his authoritarian politics and bypass the accountability-seeking role of the traditional media (Pal et al., 2017; Sinha, 2017).

Eventually, there were other far-reaching consequences of this controversy. As *Open* magazine editor Manu Joseph had feared, retribution followed. The Tata group withdrew all advertising from both *Open* and *Outlook* magazines, leading to a substantial loss in a revenue model that depends largely on advertising rather than subscriptions (Ojha, 2011). The head of the group, Ratan Tata, filed a case against *Outlook* after they published the tapes, alleging that the publication of tapes violated his right to privacy involving the magazine in costly litigation. Though it may not have been a direct consequence of this, both Manu Joseph and his political editor, Hartosh Bal, were asked to leave *Open* magazine in 2013, and Vinod Mehta was eased out as editor and moved to a ceremonial position in *Outlook* in 2012.

It is important to examine the institutional context in which this scandal took place. As Schudson (1983) argues, the role of journalism in a democracy cannot be understood outside the evolving institutional architecture of democracy. Journalists caught on tape cozying up to the influential lobbyist were one of the very public targets of the simmering public anger against crony capitalism and unprecedented levels of corruption in government. Progressive legislation such as the Right to Information Act and profound transformation of the political sphere with new political actors like the Aam Aadmi Party had been relentlessly exposing the murky links between big business and the state. This unholy nexus has underpinned economic growth since liberalization. Such was the public outrage as scandal after scandal tumbled out that it mobilized public protests in the country's capital, Delhi, burgeoning into an anticorruption movement. Public anger was also fueled by slowing economic growth and surging inflation, which became dominant electoral issues in the subsequent national election in 2014.

Even as mainstream media abdicated its monitorial role, the role was taken over by a robust public sphere and civil society that contributed to imposing limits on the media's acquiescence to structural constraints and stepped in to put pressure on the journalistic field and if needed, participate in it enabled by new communication technologies. In a non-Western democratic context, the media and the rest of the institutional architecture seem to be locked in a dynamic dance as roles played by and demands placed on different institutions shift constantly.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to deploy the theoretical foundations of field theory and new institutional theory to examine the external and internal influences that constrain and enable journalistic autonomy and illuminate the role journalism plays in a crony capitalist polity.

"Startling" Homogeneity

Beneath the surface appearance of an independent and noisy news media lurks the reality of a journalism buffeted by strong heteronomous pressures that constrain its freedom and stifle its practice. These pressures are particularly strong when interests of the ruling elite are involved. The salient finding of this research is that the field of journalism collapses in the field of power when the pressures from the political and economic fields converge. In other words, the media displays significant subservience and deference toward the ruling elite particularly if their interests are aligned. The result is sustained self-censorship by the news media despite evident public interest in the news story, even at the risk of losing audiences.

Historically, Indian journalism has been subject to significant external pressures, notably those of ownership, the threat of withdrawal of advertisements, and political partisanship such that these constraints have been internalized. These incursions are so frequent and insidious that, over time, these tacit constraints have become constitutive of the field of journalism. New institutionalists would identify these as shared, implicit informal norms that are widely practiced although they run counter to the formal journalistic *doxa* of a watchdog role of the press. That explains the widespread precaution in effacing this story.

Environmental uncertainty, according to new institutionalists, can lead to “startling homogeneity” as it did in this case with most organizations responding by silencing democratic discourse (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Environmental conditions in this context include a weakly developed rational legal authority resulting in fear of retribution through defamation cases, feeble regulatory framework, and precarious labor conditions, which makes it easy to get rid of editors who may refuse to toe the line, overriding commercial pressures. Thus, the new institutionalist theoretical approach that news regimens evolve to mediate and counter uncertainty helps explain the sustained silence.

New institutional theorists Cook and Sparrow encourage us to see news regimes as mediators of macrolevel forces on the behavior of individual journalists. Ownership of the media has largely been controlled by a few families, and funding of the media has often been channeled through opaque ownership structures (Ranganathan & Rodrigues, 2010; Saeed, 2015; Thomas, 2010). Media economy is characterized by an interplay of formal and informal capital as well as speculative capital and players with dubious motives (Chakravartty & Roy, 2013). This has become even more pronounced since the liberalization of the economy and media industry. Thus, it would not be in the interests of capitalists related to media houses to have journalists direct the search light inward and ask uncomfortable questions. Over time, this imposed constraint of the news media being a taboo subject for journalists has been internalized by journalists.

Consolidating Crony Capitalism

Unpacking this case study indicates that it plays a far more pernicious role than mere subordination to the field of power. Political scientist Atul Kohli asserts an alliance of the political and economic elite in crony capitalist polities is not easy to institutionalize particularly in mobilized electoral democratic structures like India (Kohli, 2006, 2007). Growing democratization of traditional power relations has mobilized various previously disempowered groups (Bardhan, 2001). Liberalization of the economy has reconstituted the private sector, resulting in a measure of economic renewal. Cumulatively, they represent a degree of fragmentation of the hitherto largely cohesive power structure amid underlying continuity (Bardhan, 2001). Liberalization has altered the balance of power between the political and economic sections of the ruling class, but the political elite is still in a position to distribute largesse to private capital. Economic and political renewal has resulted in a proliferation of power conflicts over the allocation of state’s resources (Kohli, 2006).

Political and economic renewal threatens the entrenched interests of the hegemonic elite and needs to be shored up. Thus, political and economic alignments are in need of constant negotiation and maintenance. Previously a marginal player, the media, situated uniquely between the political economic fields, with access and proximity to both, plays a pivotal role. Journalists have access to the ruling elite in their role of news gatherers and disseminators. The news media also has the power to shape news that places them in an important position in the power structure. Journalists employ this position to act as a broker between the state and capital as business competes for the state’s resources. The inference that can be drawn is that the news media were employed by the dominant elite to negotiate and stitch up the interests of a coalition of the economic and political elite. The growth of the news media with its deep linkages to state and market, increasing centrality in political and cultural processes, plays the role of enabling consolidation of this dominant alliance of the ruling elite.

The transcripts reveal that access rather than a critical distance to the corporate world and political class is a sine qua non for professional success (U. Rao, 2010b). The trope of access alludes to the instrumentalization of the press, often by capitalists, vying for allocation of resources at the discretion of the state. Paradoxically, instrumentalization deploys the symbolic power of the media that inheres in the journalistic field. The conversations exposed the mechanisms by which business exercises its power in the polity and seeks to strengthen it with the state's collusion. The exposure of widespread complicity of the journalistic field with the structures of power, of being one of them, was a key reason for the media owners and editors' aversion to the Radia tapes.

Heterogeneity

Untangling the Political and Economic

And yet dismissing the media as subordinate to and instrumentalized by the powerful does not explain why and how the self-censorship was disrupted. Analysis of the disruption of censorship requires an account of the transformative impulses that were gathering momentum in the political field as corruption scandals hit an increasingly vulnerable government. This was a consequence of forces unleashed by liberalization, which led to unchecked accumulation of wealth, consolidation of crony capitalism, along with growing economic inequality (Bardhan, 2001). Pervasive venality and a slowing economy catalyzed a popular mobilization in the national capital in 2011. Eventually, this movement mutated to a fledgling political party, the Aam Aadmi Party [the Common Man Party] that exposed the nexus between the news media and the ruling class, making an impressive electoral debut (Udupa, 2014).

Over a longer term, deepening democratization has led to an expansion of civil society and the democratic public sphere transforming the political field (S. Rao & Mudgal, 2015). Liberalization has fashioned a rising urban middle class conditioned by mediated neoliberal tenets of "consumer modernity and responsabilized citizens" (Udupa, 2015, p. 203). These civil society actors mobilized social media to articulate their anger against systemic corruption and crony capitalism. Popular sentiment, reflected on social media, was combative and implacable, questioning the news media's legitimacy, forcing mainstream press to relinquish its subservience (Chadha, 2012).

These democratic strains in the political sphere led to a divergence in the political and economic fields that the journalistic field was forced to reflect at the risk of losing its credibility and legitimacy. Thus, an elision of the political and economic influences, as argued by new institutional theorists, provides a partial analysis of the factors that impel changes in the journalistic field.

Media Logic

Both *Open* and *Outlook* magazines were owned by corporates whose interests were also threatened when the Radia tapes were published, and yet, they defied the prevailing orthodoxy. This gives weight to the contention that the logic of the field is not reducible to market forces. This research illuminates professional norms and competition that drives journalists to defy the prevailing orthodoxy of treating some topics as taboo. The relative positions in the field and the interplay of cultural and economic capital

possessed were crucial determinants of whether news organizations were subservient or critical of established power. Those with considerable economic and cultural power—that is, most mainstream media—at the center of the field aligned themselves with the dominant power, often justifying their self-censorship by employing those very journalistic norms that were developed to uphold their monitorial role. It was smaller, economically impoverished players who stood to gain cultural capital in the struggle for recognition in a crowded field who were willing to take tremendous risks and disrupt the self-censorship.

However, Bourdieu's overreliance on economic determinism underestimates individual subversive acts (U. Rao, 2010b). Both news magazines challenged the most powerful interests in the country, largely due to the intrepid journalists in authoritative positions within these media organizations. Most journalists in the English media, including the ones implicated by the Radia tapes and those who defied the silence, are members of dominant upper caste and class, educated in elite Western institutions professing to uphold global journalistic values. And yet only a handful defied censorship. These few were well known for their uncompromising editorial independence, which had often cost them their job and relegated them to culturally rich though economically marginal media houses.

Journalists at *Open* and *Outlook* employed stealth and their cultural capital to push the story through. Interviews with other journalists indicate their attempts were blocked by editors and owners. They lacked the authority, not the intentionality. U. Rao (2010a) describes how journalistic activity involves navigating the complexity of "closeness to the powerful, their desire to be critical and their dependence on private capital" (p. 714). Thus, journalistic *doxa* of holding the powerful accountable cohabits and collides with myriad pressures making journalistic practice fraught with contradictions.

Transcripts of Resistance

Journalistic *doxa* of holding the powerful to account enables journalists to develop strategies of resistance. Journalists had to bypass received notions like objectivity and impartiality to sabotage the self-censorship imposed by the mainstream news media. The very weapons journalists in the Western context adopted as organizational and institutional firewalls (Zelizer, 2004), like impartiality and balanced reporting, were employed to uphold and defend self-censorship in the Indian context. Pressures from various sources including threat of legal action would be exerted to prevent publication or broadcast as soon as those shown in a negative light get wind of the story. Notably, the handful of journalists who defied the suppression of the story felt they had to ignore these journalistic norms altogether, to do the kind of journalism that serves public interest.

Democratizing Potential of the Internet

In field theory architecture, it was democratic impulses in the political field, thwarted by a subordinate journalistic field, that employed emerging technology. Analyzing the media coverage of the election campaign for the national elections in 2014, Ranganathan (2014) observes that it was, in fact, the overriding commercial agenda of the mainstream media that pushed political actors, activists, and voters alike onto the new media space. Thus, her assertion that the employment of the new media space needs to

be read in the context of the mainstream media's role rather than in the context of new technologies' potential on democratic discourse, I would argue, applies to the Nira Radia case as well.

In Gieryn's (1983) conception of boundary work, non-journalists forced the "expansion" of the borders of journalism with new participants, practices and technologies coming to be absorbed as acceptable journalism (pp. 15–17). This, in turn, is indicative of the expansion of democracy, arguably, where journalism is no longer monopolized by a narrow elite (McNair, 2000). This case study would seem to provide empirical evidence that emerging technologies are challenging the pro-systemic bias in the mainstream commercial media.

However, Dutton's optimism about these forming a "fifth estate" in Western liberal democracies needs to be tempered in contexts outside of the West (Dutton, 2009). There is no doubt that they are reconfiguring the state and citizen relationship. However, this can easily be mobilized for antidemocratic enactments. Udupa (2015) highlights how Twitter's emancipatory potential has been subjected to organized ideological production by Hindu nationalist party BJP in India. Co-option of these technologies and their mobilization by structures of power has significantly undermined enthusiasm about them.

Implications

This case study has disquieting implications for the role of the press in Indian democracy. Mainstream news media plays a salient role in augmenting the patterns of structurally maintained power of the elites. Intensifying commercial interests has led to commandeering the journalistic field to negotiate political and economic alignments in a mobilized democracy in the project of institutionalizing the narrow alliance of the political and economic elite on which the India polity rests.

It is a sobering account of how the news media, particularly in its relationship with the ruling elite, does the exact opposite of what it is charged to do in a democracy—aiding the consolidation of a dominant elite that has shown "how laughably easy it is to subvert a supposedly robust democracy" (V. Mehta, 2014, p. 48). It also highlights how fraught journalistic practice is in contexts where the need for close proximity and access to news sources has to be reconciled with holding them accountable.

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